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Dingell Wary of Stealth Secrecy

A behind-the-scenes battle of the titans is about to break into the open on Capitol Hill over access to information on the super-secret Stealth bomber, the Pentagon's most jealously guarded project.

On one side—the inside—is Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), whose clout is undiminished by his announcement that this is his last year in the Senate. As chairman of the Armed Services Committee and a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence, Goldwater is one of the privileged few who has been given a peek at the Stealth program. He does not care to see membership in the exclusive Stealth oversight club expanded.

On the outside trying to look in is Rep. John D. Dingell (D-Mich.), chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee and its oversight subcommittee. He has requested a variety of Pentagon documents on Stealth and other classified programs, determined to learn whether the secrecy is covering up waste and mismanagement as well as providing security for the weapons programs themselves.

Goldwater privately has urged Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger not to give the material to Dingell. "It has recently come to my attention that a congressional subcommittee, not charged with oversight responsibilities for national security matters, has requested broad access to all Air Force 'black' programs," Goldwater wrote to Weinberger three weeks ago. "Black" programs are those that are not acknowledged publicly.

"... I think you ought to resist any stretching of

jurisdictional boundaries that expand access to these critically sensitive national security programs," Goldwater continued.

The letter never mentions Dingell by name, but a Senate Armed Services Committee aide acknowledged to our associate Donald Goldberg that it was Dingell's request that prompted the letter and that a copy was sent to the congressman.

Dingell's subcommittee got interested in the Stealth program when it learned that the FBI had discovered at least one case of a kickback on a subcontract for the aircraft. A man involved in the contracting process for Northrop Corp., the plane's manufacturer, pleaded guilty to accepting \$4,000 for awarding a subcontract to a California company, according to a letter Dingell wrote to Weinberger.

"This incident is disturbing," Dingell wrote. "Secrecy is being used by the contractors as a device to cloak mischarging, overcharging and, in some cases, engaging in outright illegal activities. This case appears to be the tip of the iceberg. Because the Air Force apparently has little or no accountability for its 'black' programs, who can say otherwise?" Critics have raised serious questions about the ability of the Stealth aircraft to evade Soviet radar, as well as other bugs in the program, which probably will cost \$80 billion eventually.

Goldwater, in his letter, took "strong exception" to Dingell's charge of "ineffective oversight," and added a barb of his own: "Knowing the potential of Congress to feed the news-hungry," he wrote, "I have been and remain a strong supporter of existing security procedures for congressional access and oversight of these programs."